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## DOES JAMES 1:5 TEACH ABOUT PRAYING FOR A TESTIMONY?

by Eric Johnson

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There is nothing more important to a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon) than having a personal “testimony” confirm the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and, ultimately, Mormonism. Fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith, Jr., first utilized James 1:5 as a Mormon proof text in 1820. Mormonism teaches that God the Father and Jesus appeared to the eventual church founder in a vision that took place soon after he prayed about the true church.

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”<sup>1</sup> Moroni 10:4, found at the end of the Book of Mormon, is another LDS scriptural verse often cited to support the need for a personal experience. It says, “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are <sup>[[[ ]]</sup>not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

The positive feeling received by Mormons has been called a “burning in the bosom.” The term comes from Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 9:8, which reads, “But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.”

Talk to the typical Latter-day Saint at length and it is not uncommon to hear a testimonial about how Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, the Book of Mormon is inspired scripture, and the New Testament church has been restored. Is praying about a religious book biblical? And how important are feelings when determining truth?

**The Testimony.** Mormons take their personal testimonies very seriously. Those who insensitively joke about their experience (i.e., suggesting that the feeling comes as a result of eating too much spicy food the night before) generally cause hurt feelings, as this is a sacred issue for the faithful Latter-day Saint.

Quoting D&C 9, Apostle Dallin H. Oaks explained, “What does a ‘burning in the bosom’ mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, I have never had a burning in the bosom. Surely, the word ‘burning’ in this scripture signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity. That is the witness many received. That is the way revelation works.”<sup>2</sup>

Tad R. Callister, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, told a story at the end of a general conference address that illustrates how personal this testimony can be:

*Some years ago I attended one of our worship services in Toronto, Canada. A 14-year-old girl was the speaker. She said that she had been discussing religion with one of her friends at school. Her friend said to her, “What religion do you belong to?” She replied, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons.” Her friend replied, “I know that church, and I know it’s not true.” “How do you know?” came the reply. “Because,” said her friend, “I have researched it.” “Have you read the Book of Mormon?” “No,” came the answer. “I haven’t.” Then this sweet young girl responded, “Then you haven’t researched my church, because I have read every page of the Book of Mormon and I know it’s true.”<sup>3</sup>*

According to the LDS worldview, feelings take precedence over rational thought when determining the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. In an LDS magazine, layperson Rachel Nielsen explained that one way to test a personal experience is to “ask yourself if the thought or the feeling is inviting you to do good. If it is, you can be assured that it is from God.”<sup>4</sup> Such a simplistic test becomes useless, since the gurus in India, the imams in Saudi Arabia, and the monks in Thailand all feel their beliefs guide them to “do good,” though they all reject the tenets of Mormonism. Few atheists believe in doing the wrong things.

While Christians should certainly pray for guidance, abandoning logic and biblical discernment is not the answer. Good feelings do not replace facts. A person on an aircraft with failed engines may sincerely desire for gravity to be suspended, yet wishing the situation away cannot counteract reality. In the same way, all the good feelings in the world cannot override false LDS teachings, which include the beliefs that God was once a human being, personal efforts must be added to grace for a right standing before God, and getting married in an LDS temple for “time and eternity” is a requirement for personal exaltation, or godhood.

In response to the Mormon’s question “Shouldn’t Moroni’s promise always work?” Daniel Ludlow, the director of LDS Church Correlation Review, provided a precise list for receiving a positive confirmation:

*God cannot and does not lie, and his promises made through his prophets are sure. Therefore, any person who claims to have followed the various requirements but says he has not gained a testimony should check to see which step he has not followed faithfully or completely:*

1. *He should read and ponder the Book of Mormon — all of it.*
2. *He should remember the methods God has used in working with the peoples of both the Book of Mormon and the Bible — and ponder these things in his heart.*
3. *He should put himself in a frame of mind where he would be willing to accept (receive) all of “these things” — the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and the way God works with men.*
4. *“With a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ,” he should ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Jesus Christ “if these things are not true.”*
5. *He should be able to recognize the promptings and feelings which will be evidences to him of the truth of “these things” (including the Book of Mormon) as they are made manifest unto him “by the power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>5</sup>*

If the “right” answer isn’t received, then the onus is pinned on the seeker’s back to gain more “sincerity” or “real intent.” Such reasoning provides a psychological edge to the LDS missionaries, especially when they deal with prospective converts who, in their hearts, desire Mormonism to be true.

**Praying about Faith.** There are several reasons why a Mormon’s reliance on a personal testimony does not make biblical sense. For one, James 1:5 is used in a way the biblical

author never intended. The context specifically speaks about gaining *wisdom*, not knowledge. Wisdom is the proper application of knowledge. James tells his Christian audience that wisdom can be sought when undergoing trials and temptations.

First John 4:1 commands believers to “try [test] the spirits.” Why? Because many false prophets have gone out into the world! Critical thinking is encouraged. The admonition is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your *mind*” (Luke 10:27, emphasis added). It’s impossible to truly love another person without getting to know her first. So it is with God and truth. As a matter of fact, the Bereans in Acts 17:11 didn’t resort to praying about Paul’s message and settling for a nebulous testimony; rather, they “searched the scriptures daily” and tested the apostle’s words against what God had already revealed. For this, they were called “noble.”

Many Mormons who rely on their testimonies have never thought through the implications of using prayer as a standard for measuring truth. Consider the subjectiveness of love, for instance. Most people have two, three, or even a dozen “significant others” over the years before finding the right person to marry. (And even this may not always work out the way it was expected!) It’s easy to “feel” in love during a romantic relationship. But when these temporary relationships fall apart, an objective look back may reveal that feelings were blinding the person to reality, serving as nothing more than deceptive roadblocks.

God’s Word never commands believers to trust in hunches or gut feelings that could lead to disastrous decisions. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Proverbs 14:12 warns, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death,” while Proverbs 28:26 adds that “he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.” According to 1 Thessalonians 5:21, we are to “prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

Finally, many Latter-day Saints have never considered the implications for praying about a particular spiritual book or a religion. If praying about truth is commanded, then perhaps prayers ought to be offered concerning the scriptures of religions such as Islam (Qu’ran), Buddhism (Tripitaka), or Hinduism (Vedas). After all, isn’t it possible these other religions might provide a bigger “bang” for the buck?

This doesn’t mean the Christian should abandon a personal testimony. A heartfelt story may be a powerful apologetic tool and can be very effective. It just shouldn’t take precedence over the facts taught by the Bible, which is God’s litmus test for truth.

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## NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the King James Version.
- 2 Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," *Ensign*, March 1997, 13.
- 3 Tad R. Callister, "The Book of Mormon—A Book from God," *Ensign*, November 2011, 76.
- 4 Rachel Nielsen, "What If I Don't Feel a Burning in the Bosom?" *New Era*, June 2014, 19.
- 5 "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, March 1986, 50. This was quoted in chapter 52 of a church manual titled *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–22* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996).